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ABSTRACT

A researcher examined his experiences shadowing young children as they participated in a voluntary transfer and desegregation program that allowed their parents to choose to send them to schools outside their home district. This paper describes the practice of shadowing and discusses some of the issues involved in this technique. There are three areas in which the shadowing approach has been especially complicated by the age and developmental levels of these subjects, who were in kindergarten at the time of the study. The first is the complicated area of relationships, between the researcher and the student, among students, and with adults. The second area of concern is that of roles, the multiple roles the researcher is required to play at the research site. The final area is the issue of the researcher's influence on the research subjects. Anyone thinking about using this research method with young children should give careful attention to these three issues. (SLD)

Casting My Own Shadow: Issues and Questions for Researchers Shadowing the Very Young

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I. Introduction

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As part of a pilot research project begun in August of 2000, I have been *shadowing* several kindergarten students in a public elementary school. The primary goal of this pilot study is to better understand the experience of students participating in a unique, voluntary transfer and desegregation program as they make the transition into the culture and environment of the host school.

I will begin my talk with a brief discussion of the background and circumstances of this pilot study. Subsequently, I will discuss both the practicalities of "*shadowing*" as I have used it in my study, as well as some the issues and questions that have arisen as a result of my primary research method. In particular, I will explore three areas in which my work of *shadowing* young students has been especially complicated by their age and developmental levels. These include:

- the development of RELATIONSHIPS
- the definition and assignment of ROLES
- and the potential INFLUENCE that I might have on my own topic and the experience of my subjects.

II. Overview of the Project

In 1976, a group of California parents whose children attended the Eastside School district in Northern California, filed a lawsuit alleging unconstitutional segregation in all of the surrounding school districts. Eastside served a predominantly poor and minority (at the time largely African-American) community, and the surrounding districts served predominantly white and more affluent communities. After ten years of mediation, the parties to this suit reached a settlement in Superior Court in March of 1986, the most significant outcome of which has been the Canford Voluntary Transfer Program (which I will refer to as either the Canford Program or VTP for Voluntary Transfer Program). Through this program, parents in the ten districts covered by the Canford agreement may apply for a voluntary inter-district transfer for their children either into or out of the Eastside School District (ESD). In practice this has meant the availability of a fixed number of slots in each of the surrounding districts for students from Eastside.

I am conducting my study in one of the schools in the Westside School District (WSD), one of the several districts named in the initial lawsuit. Since 1986, Westside has made approximately sixty slots available to VTP students, most of whom enter the program (by design) in kindergarten or first grade.¹

The above mentioned voluntary integration program is at the same time unique and illustrative, and it deserves further study and analysis on both counts. Of the wide array of potentially interesting aspects of this program, my research study is designed to highlight the experience of program students, focusing on the issues of school transition and adaptation for VTP students into a novel, neighborhood school culture.

While the school district views the Canford program as successful on the whole, this success has been appraised on a very limited scale, primarily through traditional measures such as grades, standardized test scores, attrition rates, and parent surveys,. Less attention has been paid to the myriad other effects and consequences of this

voluntary integration program, particularly in the social and emotional domains. Moreover, to date, no one has looked deeply at the program from the students' perspective. Through this study, I am working to explore the richness and complexity of the student experience as program participants transition into the host school setting during the kindergarten year.

III. Promise and Practicalities: What shadowing has meant for me

Like most of my colleagues on this symposium panel, one of my primary reasons for choosing to use *shadowing* as a research method was to gain insights into a program or phenomenon from the perspective of its participants. Particularly in the practice of educational research, such view points have too often been overlooked.

As mentioned in our panel's introduction, as part of this symposium we hope to draw upon our collective experience and wisdom (this panel's as well as yours) to continue working on developing and deepening an understanding of what *shadowing* entails, requires, provides, and incurs.

In my own experience with shadowing, I can highlight the following elements as essential ingredients for this kind of work:

1. *access and proximity* (both of which are constantly being negotiated)
2. *extended periods of time* (both in a sitting and over time)
3. *relationship building* (multiple; ongoing; both with subjects and other individuals in the field)
4. *transition spaces* (these often the best times and places for productive *shadowing*)
- and 5. *blending: the need for me to fit in as part of the natural environment*

¹ In order to protect the identity of both teachers and students in my study, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for the names of all individual participants in this study, as well as the names of schools, school districts and related program titles.

When each of these elements is in place, I am able to focus my research work on *shadowing* my primary others. Not surprisingly, lining up these elements takes a great deal of time, preparation, effort, negotiating, patience, and so forth. This is a constant and essential part of my field work that I have begun to call "field maintenance." One cannot simply enter a place, choose a subject and begin to *shadow*. "Field maintenance" is like gardening, it takes a great deal of foundational work before you can enjoy the "fruits" of that labor. Moreover, such work is ongoing, constant, if you want to continue to have productive results.

So, a great deal of my time in the field is spent on maintenance, not on *shadowing* - much more so than I have ever imagined when I first began this pilot study. And much of the work that I will talk about today has to do with recurring issues that I seem to face around the balance between maintenance and *shadowing*. I believe that this balance is required for all researchers doing *shadowing* (and the other panelists have also alluded to this work in their presentations). More particularly, the rest of my talk will be focused on issues that I think are especially salient for researchers *shadowing* the very young, a fact that I believe compounds these tensions in particular ways. As you might imagine, the issues of access, proximity, relationship building and so forth are all modified in some way due to the characteristics of the research subjects.

IV. Issues and Questions for Researchers Shadowing the Very Young

As I mentioned earlier, in my on-going research, there are three key components of my work in *shadowing* that constantly rise to the fore: Relationships, Roles, and Influence. As you might imagine or know from your own experience, there is a significant difference in building and maintaining working relationships with high school and kindergarten students, and thus I would like to highlight a few key issues that have arisen for me as a researcher *shadowing* very young students.

RELATIONSHIPS

From my field notes ...

TALIA (to me): Why do you always bring that book? (referring to my notebook)

ME: *To help me remember things that I see and learn.*

What do you think about that?

Do you think that's a good idea?

TALIA: You do!

One of my first jobs as a researcher in the field is explaining myself to my others. This is a significant event in the development of long-term and important relationships, a key ingredient in my quest to shadow. In determining how to present myself and my work to my others I have fallen back on a phrase used by my former mentor and advisor, Alan Peshkin. Buddy used to ask me "which true story" was I sharing with which of my others? The answer to the question, *Which version did they need?* should direct which version I chose to share.

Because I am dealing with such young others the "true stories" that I tell becomes a particularly complicated issue. Hence from the onset one of the complications I have to face in regards to my *shadowing* has to do with the ambiguity of my relationships to my others. While my colleagues before me had rather explicit "researcher-as-shadow to other" relationships, my relationships with my others is less well defined, at least in this regard.

In introducing myself to my primary others (the VTP students), I have explained myself in various ways, but usually something along the lines of the following: *I used to be a kindergarten teacher.* (something they can directly relate to); *I am now back in college to learn more things about schools and education* (something they can perhaps relate to or have experience with); *I am a researcher, and that I am particularly interested in learning about what they do in and what it's like for them to be in kindergarten* (something I am less convinced that they can relate to or understand). As a former teacher myself, I know that what I express and explain to my others will be filtered and understood in ways that may be quite different from what I initially intend. These effects are heightened in working with very young children because of the

difficulty with communication skills as well as their limited knowledge, experience and understanding of the world upon which to situate new experiences and information.

So my relationships with my others are complicated from the start. My others do not know about a particularly important role that they play for me in our relationship, nor are the classroom students as a whole aware of my specific interests in the experience of a particular subset of their classmates. For me to express a fuller "true story" to my others would certainly raise other issues in terms of influencing what and who I intend to study, not to mention that to publicly name my particular others would be quite intrusive and invasive in multiple ways.

These circumstances have had an impact on my work in several ways:

* First, the ambiguity of my relationships with my others means that more of what I do is indirect or implicit. My others may come up to me to "share" something that they like or do or care about, but they are not likely to be as direct as Denise's students might be in saying, 'here's something you really need to write down in your notebook about my experience!'

* In addition, this ambiguity has meant that in order to foster close ties with *my particular others*, I have also needed to foster working relationships with the rest of the students in the classrooms in which I work. The level of intensity of these relationships has varied, but the demands are constant. This requires a great deal of maintenance. For example, if I am gone from my research site for an extended period of time, I have come to understand that I am likely to accomplish little *shadowing* upon my initial return. I will need to work on refreshing relationship, proximity, and so forth, not only with my particular others, but also attending to the demands of other children in the field as well. Were I to ignore these demands, I might lose some of the elements I need to in order to continue my *shadowing*.

* Also, because my others are so young, my relationships with the relevant adults in the field is an especially significant factor in my research. The parents and teachers in the classroom want and need to know about my presence there, though of course in different ways. In response, I must balance my own needs as a researcher and my desire to continue to be able to *shadow* with their need to know that I will prove to be a positive addition to their children's classroom environment.

All of these relationships work in multiple directions. Each set of others has expectations of *me* as an adult in the classroom, particularly given that I am working with such young children in a kindergarten classroom, and this leads to my second issue, that of ROLES.

ROLES

- *Can you tie my shoes?* (Supporter)
- *How do you spell "read"?* (Expert)
- *Can I go play in Mary's classroom?* (Boundary Interpreter)
- *Do you want to play house?* (Play Mate)
- *Know what my brother does sometimes?* (Confidant)
- *Stacy took my shovel!* (Conflict Resolver)
- *Will you read me a book?* (Helper)
- *Can I sit with you?* (Friend)
- *Would you mind walking with Talya up to the office?* (Supervisor)
- *Can you sit with this activity group today?* (Teacher)

Each of these and countless other examples represent the multiple roles I am asked to play on a frequent basis in my research site. Clearly there is a constant, ongoing negotiation about the roles I play. These roles are defined jointly and concurrently by myself and my others. Given the ambiguities and vagaries surrounding my relationships with my others, it is not surprising that there are also some issues and ambiguity around my ROLES in the classroom.

There are both benefits and drawbacks to playing these multiple roles. Fulfilling different roles is an act of maintenance. Playing these various roles provides me with access, proximity, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for my ability to *shadow*. At the same time, the roles I play sometime conflict with my *shadowing*. When students see me as "Teacher" or "Disciplinarian" am I less likely to see full or authentic interactions than when they see me as "Friend" or "Researcher"? Which roles should I shy away from? Which ones should I embrace? These are questions I must constantly struggle with in my work as a shadower.

At every such encounter, I have to balance my own needs as a researcher—primarily (1) the desire to play the role of *shadower*, and (2) the need to maintain roles and boundaries that will allow me to be effective in that role when I have the opportunity to do so—with the needs and expectations of my multiple others. In fact, I believe that *because of* rather than *in spite of* my own goals as a researcher, I cannot help but attend to some of the expectations of my others in the field. I see this as both a professional courtesy (being a good "guest"), which affords me continuing access, and an inevitability in some sense as well. For example, I certainly cannot escape being seen as an adult by the students, and I would certainly fulfill that role say by delivering first aid, if necessary.

Moreover, because my primary others are not particularly clear about my own preference in terms of roles, there is something of a "role vacuum" that gets filled in multiple ways. Since they can only vaguely know about my own view of my primary role, they make up others for me. I also believe that the level and complexity of my roles is a direct product of the age and development of the students I am *shadowing*. Were I working with college students, there may well be some role negotiation, but the primary roles on each side are more likely to be fairly clear. For my others, the primary roles of the adults in their world include teacher, parent, caregiver, doctor, bus driver, and so forth. "Shadowing Educational Researcher" is not a common role, and hence one they are less likely to attribute to me.

Another contributing and complicating factor in shadowing the very young is that in my experience students of this age tend to be less comfortable with ambiguity. When my role is unclear, I notice that the students either give me a label to make the relationship more clear and understandable for them, or they tend to be less accessible to me during times of ambiguity. While I may explain that I am a student and a researcher, for the most part, I notice children labeling me in ways that make sense to them: teacher, grown up, playmate, friend, etc. Of course I can not know exactly what they are thinking and doing in this regard, but I am constantly asking myself what role I think I'm playing and what role I think my others think I am playing. The logical questions that follow from these inquiries include what impact might these roles,

impressions and expectations have on what I am and am not able to see and learn in my role as researcher *shadower*.

INFLUENCE

From my log: 9/19/00

When I interact with F when she's playing alone, do I foster her choices and make it more difficult for her to eventually socialize w/ others? Do I make it easier for her by helping her to feel comfortable and a part of the school/class by having someone to relate to/be comfortable with? Do I encourage social interaction by virtue of being attractive to others and bringing them along to the activities with me? How can I discern any of these things, and what do they say about me and my role as a researcher in the classroom?

I am constantly aware of and alert to the issue of my own INFLUENCE on my research subject and the experience of my others. Again, because of the age and peculiarities of working with the very young, my own role in the experience of these students proves to be a significant and important concern.

In the early stages of my work, I was certainly attentive to such issues, but in a relatively broad manner. I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, to note incidents or events where I thought it might be best to reduce my proximity, and so on. However, I became acutely aware of the issue of my potential influence on my others as a *shadowing* researcher working with very young students, following a series of similar events that happened in succession after spending about three weeks at my research site. What I came to realize is that as a relatively friendly and supportive adult, I am attractive by nature to a large number of others in my research community. Again, this is useful because this allows me to develop proximity with my others for the purposes of *shadowing*.

But proximity and attraction also have other potential consequences. For example, early on I noticed that certain students in the classroom, aside from VTP students I was shadowing, particularly enjoyed and made demands of my time and attention. Not surprisingly, since I also spend a great deal of my time with and near the

VTP students, I began to notice that these two groups of students began to have more frequent and sometimes significant interactions. What was my role in facilitating such interactions? Does my presence in the environment draw more attention to my others (not only from classmates, but perhaps from teachers and others as well)? Given that the teachers are more aware of my research questions and the identity of the VTP students I am following, might they take a special interest in or approach to those students and their experience given my presence? Would these interactions and events have happened without me? Are there ways for me to continue to *shadow* that would be potentially less intrusive? Am I being too egocentric in thinking I might have an impact where I don't?

V. Conclusions

So, *Shadowing* has both benefits and drawbacks. In order to take advantage of the former, we must be cognizant of the latter.

As a researcher working with very young students, I have noted some essential elements for the work of shadowing to proceed, namely *access, proximity, extended time, relationship building, transition spaces and blending* all of which also require a great deal of vigorous, constant and consistent maintenance and attention.

Moreover, I would suggest that anyone thinking about using this method in research work with young children give careful attention to the issues of developing relationships, multiple roles and the influence that we as researchers might have on our others and their experience as well as our own research questions.

I will not attempt to share solutions to these dilemmas for I do not believe that there is any clear resolution. Rather, as shadowing researchers, we should proceed with caution and attention to our work. We should be aware of the issues that arise in the field and write about them, talk about them, and acknowledge them in our work.



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